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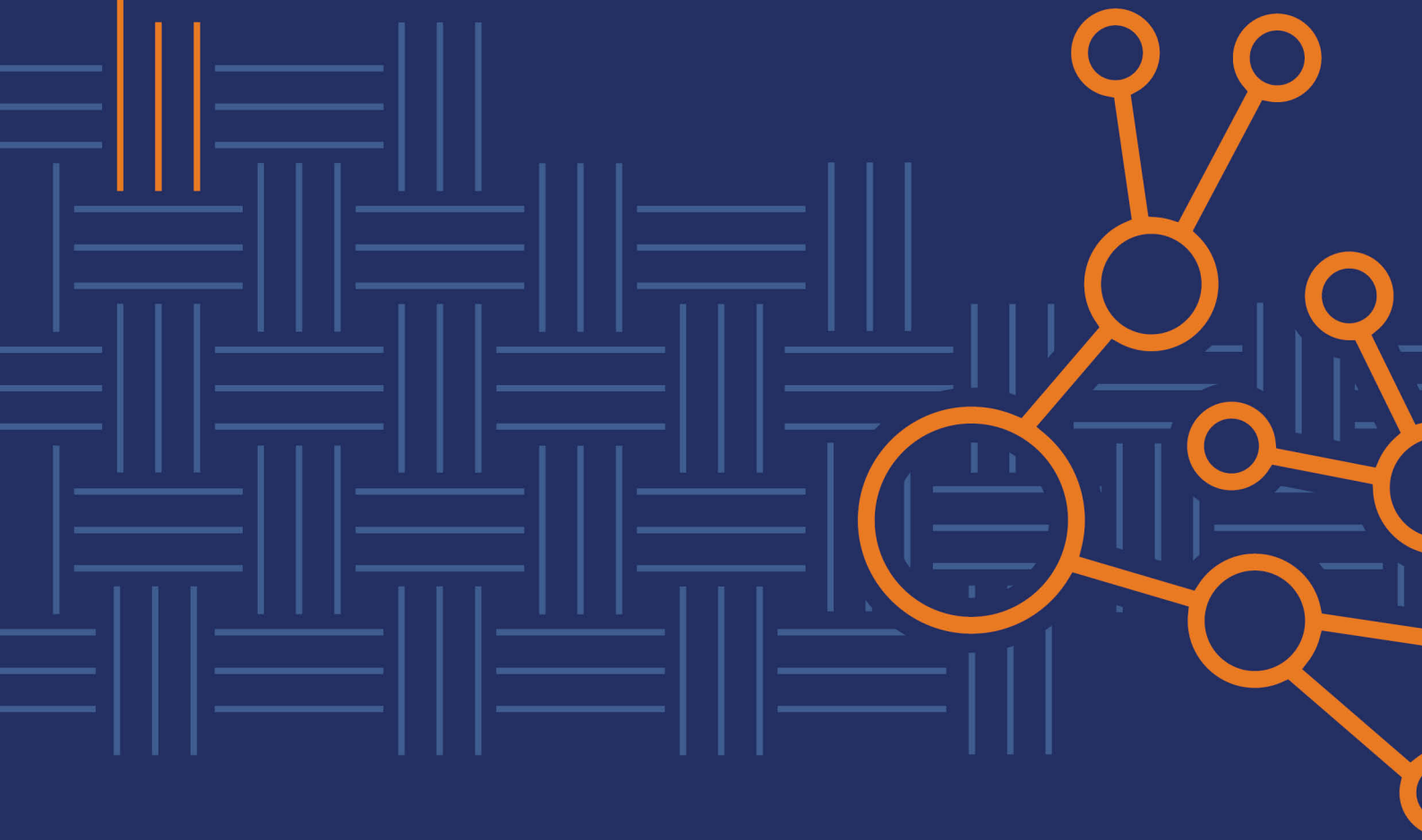
Managing authorities' engagement in the I3 Instrument

Policy brief on main findings and recommendations of the discussion group



I3 Interregional Innovation Investments Instrument

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA)

I.01 - EU and Place-based Innovation Ecosystems

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European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA)

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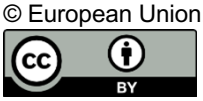

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List of Acronyms

COTER	Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget
EC	European Commission
EDP	Entrepreneurial Discovery Process
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
EU	European Union
GVC	Global Value Chain
I3	Interregional Innovation Investments
IB	Intermediate Bodies
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LDR	Less Developed Region
MAs	Managing Authorities
MDRs	More Developed Regions
PLP	Policy Learning Platform
R&D	Research and Development
S3	Smart Specialisation Strategies
S3CoP	S3 Community of Practice
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise

Executive summary

Effective engagement of Managing Authorities (MAs) is critical for the success of I3 interregional innovation projects, yet multiple barriers hinder their active participation.

Key obstacles include awareness and knowledge gaps, late involvement in project cycles, institutional diversity, capacity shortages, communication breakdowns, political cycles and shifting priorities, perceptions of bureaucracy, inward-looking regional orientations, and limited incentives for proactive engagement. These barriers collectively reduce MAs' ability to act as strategic partners, limiting alignment with regional Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3), innovation ecosystems, and EU value chains.

Addressing these challenges requires a combination of targeted measures. Clear role definitions and mandates, as seen in Jönköping (Sweden) and Kainuu (Finland), enable MAs to contribute throughout the project lifecycle. Early involvement, evidenced by practices in the Azores (Portugal), Kainuu, and Eastern Macedonia & Thrace (Greece), strengthens alignment with S3 priorities and fosters evidence-based planning. Building mutual awareness, enhancing capacities, preserving institutional memory, leveraging quality labels like the Seal of Excellence, and adopting forward-looking perspectives—illustrated in Brittany (France) and Upper Silesia (Poland)—further improve strategic engagement, continuity, and long-term impact.

By systematically implementing these recommendations, MAs can evolve from administrative gatekeepers into proactive enablers of interregional innovation, enhancing collaboration, policy relevance, and the transformative potential of I3 initiatives across the EU.

1. Introduction

The Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) instrument is crucial for building strong, place-based innovation ecosystems across the European Union (EU). This is achieved by bringing together, through complementarities and joint development, the place-based approach with the outward looking dimension of regional and national innovation systems. Thanks to these priorities, within the EU innovation policy landscape, I3 occupies a distinctive role by bridging Cohesion Policy and Horizon Europe, linking territorial development with excellence-driven innovation. Eventually, it paths trajectories for updated industrial, research, innovation and development policies.

Its effectiveness depends strongly on well-coordinated governance arrangements, with Managing Authorities (MAs) playing a central role. MAs are public bodies, typically designated by national or regional governments, responsible for the overall management and implementation of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) within their territory. Their core responsibilities include planning and programming ERDF-supported interventions, ensuring alignment with regional and national development strategies—including Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3)—deciding and supervising the use of funds, monitoring progress and results, and guaranteeing compliance with EU rules and regulations.

In the context of I3, MAs are pivotal for fostering strategic alignment, facilitating interregional collaboration, and mobilising both financial and institutional resources to maximise the impact of innovation projects within strategic EU value chains. Yet, the shift from predominantly regional to interregional cooperation introduces significant governance challenges. MAs frequently operate under fragmented mandates and unsynchronised policy cycles, while many—particularly in less-developed regions (LDRs)—have limited experience in orchestrating cross-regional collaboration. Ensuring that MAs are fully empowered and supported is therefore essential for translating I3's potential into tangible regional and European outcomes.

This policy brief draws on the work of the discussion group on how to engage better MAs in international collaboration, established under the I3 Support Facility Policy Lab. The group provides a structured platform for dialogue, exchange, and peer learning among managing authorities, S3 policy makers and other regional authorities and stakeholders seeking to enhance MA engagement in interregional innovation projects. Its focus is on identifying practical approaches to strengthen the role of MAs in supporting I3 initiatives, particularly in aligning projects with regional priorities, enabling funding synergies, and embedding long-term impact.

Over the course of 2025, the group convened in three sessions (April, June, and September) to address key challenges in engaging MAs (questions addressed by the discussion group are summarised in the box below). Discussions explored

both practical and strategic dimensions of MA engagement, drawing on experiences from multiple European regions to highlight lessons learned and actionable recommendations.

The I3DG comprised fifteen members with diverse expertise, representing public authorities. Participants were selected through an open Expression of Interest launched in January 2025.

As a **peer-learning and knowledge-sharing platform**, the discussion group aimed to:

- Leverage I3 project results to inform practical policy approaches.
- Collect examples of good practice in engaging MAs and facilitating interregional collaboration.
- Enhance policy makers' capacities to design, implement, and scale projects that strengthen interregional innovation ecosystems.

This policy brief summarises the **key insights, challenges, and recommendations emerging from the group.** While it does not focus on the operational details of individual I3 projects, it provides policy-relevant guidance for regional authorities seeking to foster stronger MA engagement, support interregional value chain creation, and maximise the impact of I3 investments.

2. The strategic role of managing authorities in I3 Projects

MAs are central actors in the successful implementation and sustainability of the I3 instrument. Their responsibilities extend beyond administrative and financial oversight: they act as connectors between European, national, and regional policy priorities, and as enablers of long-term innovation pathways.

In the current policy cycle—where stronger interregional collaboration is viewed as a cornerstone of competitiveness, climate neutrality, and digital transition—MAs play an indispensable role in bridging strategy, funding, and governance. They are **not passive stakeholders but essential strategic partners** in shaping the direction, impact, and continuity of I3 investments.

The following **six roles** capture the essence of MA engagement in I3 (see Table 1):

a) strategic alignment
b) funding synergies
c) policy and regulatory support
d) facilitation and connection
e) credibility and legitimacy
f) long-term sustainability

Table 1. The main roles of MAs in I3 Projects

Role of MAs in I3 projects	Description
Strategic alignment with S3	MAs ensure that I3 projects are not isolated initiatives but are firmly embedded in S3 and broader innovation agendas. This alignment prevents fragmentation, enhances the cumulative impact of investments, and guarantees that interregional collaboration complements—rather than duplicates—ongoing regional priorities. In practice, MA engagement helps mobilise resources for innovation areas with the highest transformative potential, linking regional strengths to EU-wide priorities such as the green and digital transitions, food security, and health.
Funding synergies across multiple instruments	MAs are pivotal in orchestrating funding synergies. By strategically linking ERDF resources with Horizon Europe, ESIF, and national or regional funds, they enhance financial depth and resilience for I3 initiatives. The capacity to orchestrate funding synergies requires an appropriate evidence base, tailored to the characteristics and priorities of each region (NUTS1/NUTS2/ NUTS3). This coordination reduces fragmentation and maximises value for money, enabling I3 projects to benefit from complementary support at different stages of the innovation cycle—from research and demonstration to market uptake and scaling. Such synergies are especially critical in less developed regions, where single-source funding often falls short of achieving critical mass.

Policy and regulatory support	MAs create an enabling policy and regulatory environment for I3 projects. They ensure compliance with EU and national frameworks, streamline administrative procedures, and reduce barriers for beneficiaries. By offering regulatory clarity and promoting experimentation—such as through pilot actions or regulatory sandboxes—MAs help balance innovation with accountability.
Facilitation and connection	MAs also act as facilitators and connectors, building bridges across institutions, regions, and stakeholder communities. They foster dialogue between policymakers, innovation actors, and fund managers, helping to align expectations, identify synergies, and overcome bottlenecks. This relational function moves MAs from being perceived as passive actors to active co-designers of interregional innovation pathways, fostering trust and collaboration within and across governance levels
Credibility and legitimacy	MA endorsement provides a strong signal of credibility. As public authorities responsible for EU fund management, their backing legitimises I3 projects in the eyes of regional, national, and European stakeholders. This legitimacy strengthens partnerships, attracts private co-investment, and increases confidence among research organisations and enterprises. Active MA participation enhances both the political and financial viability of interregional projects.
Long-term sustainability	MAs ensure that I3 results endure beyond the project's lifespan. By embedding outcomes into operational programmes, regional strategies, and long-term investment frameworks, they secure continuity and scaling. Sustainability also comes from connecting I3 outputs to mainstream ERDF spending, ensuring that successful pilots are replicated and integrated into broader policy ecosystems. In this way, MAs act as custodians of interregional innovation legacies.

In summary, MAs are pivotal to transforming the I3 instrument from a funding mechanism into a strategic driver of interregional innovation. By combining their mandate with strategic vision, coordination capacity, and facilitation skills, they bridge institutional silos and connect diverse innovation actors. Their active engagement ensures that I3 projects are credible, coherent, and impactful anchored in regional strengths yet aligned with European ambitions. Ultimately, MAs serve as both stewards and catalysts of interregional cooperation, ensuring that innovation investments translate into long-lasting territorial transformation.

3. Key insights on ensuring political engagement of MAs in I3 projects

3.1. Key questions addressed by the discussions group

The work of the discussion group in 2025 aimed **to strengthen MAs engagement in the I3 projects** gathering insights and providing actionable recommendations around the two set of questions[1] (see Box1).

Box 1. Key questions addressed by the discussion group

1. **How to ensure political engagement of MAs for interregional collaboration along the project?**

- How to obtain strong and political mandate for inter-regional collaboration?
- Who are the ERDF MAs supporting the projects?
- Should S3 regional authorities be also considered?
- How to best justify/communicate the value-added (outcomes) of interregional collaboration to regional decision-makers?

2. **How to reinforce the capacities and willingness of structural funds' managing authorities to facilitate the implementation of interregional collaboration projects?**

- What specific skills or competencies do managing authorities currently lack for supporting interregional collaboration projects?
- What training or support programs could be implemented to build these capacities?
- What are the main barriers (institutional, political, or motivational) that affect the willingness of managing authorities to engage in interregional collaboration?
- How can incentives be structured to enhance the motivation of managing authorities to support such projects?

Discussions within the group highlighted that political engagement is critical for aligning projects with regional development priorities, ensuring access to complementary funding, and reinforcing the credibility and sustainability of interregional initiatives. At the same time, participants identified several persistent challenges that limit effective MA involvement, including institutional diversity, capacity constraints, lack of experience or tools for impactful interregional cooperation and diverse, and fragmented communication channels.

Based on these deliberations, the next subsection provides a structured overview of the main barriers to effective MA engagement, together with key

[1] https://interregional-innovation-investments.ec.europa.eu/discussion-groups/how-to-engage-managing-authorities-in-interregional-collaboration

recommendations emerging from the discussion group (presented in Chapter 4). These insights offer practical guidance for policy makers, project coordinators, and other stakeholders seeking to strengthen political support for, and active participation in, interregional innovation projects.

3.2. Barriers to effective engagement

While MAs are widely recognised as **central to the success of I3 projects**, their **effective engagement remains uneven** across Member States and regions. The discussion group meetings highlighted a set of **recurrent barriers that limit MA participation** and, in turn, weaken the transformative potential of I3 initiatives. These barriers are multifaceted, encompassing technical, institutional, and political dimensions, and reflect both systemic challenges and region-specific dynamics.

This subsection synthesises the main obstacles identified by the group, structured around **eight critical themes**, and illustrates how these barriers interact to affect MA engagement and project outcomes:

1. Awareness and knowledge gaps

Awareness and knowledge gaps can be grouped into two categories: (i) those directly related to the I3 programme and its potential, and (ii) those concerning the preparation required to fully benefit from interregional cooperation.

- A persistent issue is the limited awareness among MAs regarding I3's objectives, modalities, and potential benefits. Many authorities still perceive I3 as a niche instrument rather than a strategic tool for scaling interregional collaboration and leveraging S3 priorities. Consequently, the added value of participation—such as enhanced access to EU value chains, new investment pipelines, and stronger innovation ecosystems—is not always fully understood. Without this foundational knowledge, MAs face difficulties in securing political support, allocating adequate resources, and actively engaging in project design and monitoring.
- Preparing for interregional cooperation requires identifying domains where collaboration adds value—for example, through feasibility studies or by enhancing S3 analyses to include provisions that maximise policy effectiveness. This could involve exploring larger markets, complementary or advanced research, or jointly developing innovation systems. Awareness of the limitations of purely place-based approaches is particularly important in value chain optimisation. National or regional innovation funds could support these preparatory activities. Moreover, under the updated 2024 Structural Funds regulations[2], MAs may also be

[2] Technical Assistance, Articles 35, 36, 38, and reference to Article 51.

able to claim funding for such activities directly from ERDF or other Structural Fund programmes.

2. Late involvement in the project cycle

In numerous cases, MAs are engaged only at the endorsement stage, providing letters of support for proposals. This delayed entry prevents them from contributing to strategic decision-making during the co-creation phase, when alignment with regional priorities and funding synergies could be maximised. It also reduces the capacity to connect with potential partners/regions that are of strategic or long term importance for the MA's territory. Consequently, MAs may be perceived as passive actor rather than as active co-designers of innovation strategies. This undermines trust between project consortia and MAs, reducing opportunities for learning and long-term impact and embedding interregional cooperation.

3. Institutional diversity

The definition and scope of MA responsibilities vary widely across regions and Member States. In some contexts, multiple bodies operate in this field - such as different agencies, and ministries - creating uncertainty for project applicants and inconsistencies in engagement. In some cases, the delegation of such roles, to regional development or innovation agencies can slow down the policy dialogue. This institutional diversity can limit the effectiveness of MAs, hinder transparent communication, and create challenges for applicants in navigating the endorsement and approval process. Clear role definitions of MAs are therefore essential to ensure accountability, coordination, and effective support throughout the project lifecycle.

4. Capacity shortages

Resource constraints, particularly in less-developed regions (LDRs), are a systemic challenge. Limited staff, high turnover, and insufficient technical expertise prevent MAs from dedicating personnel to I3 initiatives. Even when there is willingness to engage, insufficient capacity undermines continuity, restricts participation in monitoring and evaluation, and weakens the strategic guidance MAs can provide and alignment and synergies with other regional strategic priorities. In contrast, more developed regions (MDRs) often have established innovation support infrastructures, have developed complementary

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European Commission, Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 as updated on 30.6.2024, http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/1060/2024-06-30.

European Commission (2023), Cohesion 2021–2027: forging an ever stronger Union, Report on the outcome of 2021–2027 Cohesion Policy programming, SWD(134) final. Chapter 9: The impact of Cohesion Policy.

European Commission (2024), European Structural and Investment Funds 2023: Summary report of the annual programme implementation reports covering implementation in 2014–2020, COM(2024) 6 of 15 January 2024.

European Union (2021), Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

innovation support and funding mechanisms, thus highlighting a disparity in the ability to implement interregional projects effectively.

5. Communication breakdown

Even when initial endorsement is secured, communication between project teams and MAs is often sporadic or one-directional. Updates on project progress, results, or challenges are rarely provided systematically, limiting MAs' ability to align projects with regional priorities or use insights to inform policy adjustments. This absence of feedback loops reinforces the perception of MAs as passive stakeholders and prevents the continuous learning necessary for improving project outcomes and policy relevance.

6. Political cycles, shifting priorities and knowledge retention

Electoral cycles, government reshuffles, and shifting political priorities can disrupt the continuity of MA engagement. Changes in personnel or leadership often lead to loss of institutional memory and accumulated knowledge about ongoing interregional projects, which can create uncertainty for project consortia and weaken strategic oversight. Maintaining mechanisms for knowledge retention and capitalisation—such as documentation of decisions, structured handovers, and continuous staff training—is essential to preserve expertise, ensure continuity across political cycles, and safeguard the long-term impact of interregional initiatives.

7. Perceptions of bureaucracy and risk aversion

From the perspective of project consortia, MAs are sometimes perceived as slow, overly cautious, and focused primarily on compliance rather than strategic facilitation. While regulatory oversight is essential, this perception can discourage innovators and businesses from engaging MAs as active partners, undermining collaboration. Addressing this reputational challenge is crucial for transforming MAs into trusted enablers of interregional innovation. This is especially important when working alongside SMEs both as project partners and beneficiaries of cascade funding mechanisms.

8. Inward-looking orientation

Some regions maintain a traditionally inward-looking approach, prioritising local actors and capabilities while underestimating the benefits of external collaboration and creating the conditions for long term interregional cooperation. While such focus has helped consolidate S3 around regional strengths, it can limit opportunities for interregional partnerships. Encouraging MAs to adopt a more outward-looking perspective enables regions to position themselves within broader European value chains, access complementary expertise, and attract additional resources. In this way, interregional projects can transform local strengths into shared European solutions that simultaneously support regional development and EU-wide missions.

9. Limited incentives for MAs´ active involvement

A final barrier to the effective engagement of MAs in I3 projects is the absence of direct financial incentives or dedicated funding for their participation. While MAs play a central role in ensuring strategic alignment, regulatory compliance, and sustainability, their involvement is often expected on a voluntary basis, without any financial compensation or allocation within project budgets. This lack of remuneration discourages proactive engagement and limits their capacity to contribute meaningfully, particularly given their existing administrative workload and resource constraints.

In summary, the barriers identified highlight the complex and interconnected nature of challenges affecting MA engagement in I3 projects. From knowledge gaps and late involvement to institutional diversity, capacity constraints, and political or cultural factors, these obstacles collectively limit the ability of MAs to act as strategic partners in interregional innovation and driving the competitiveness of EU value chains.

Addressing them requires a combination of targeted capacity building, clearer role definitions, proactive communication, active engagement with relevant EU networks, sharing good practices and mechanisms to preserve institutional memory. By systematically tackling these issues, MAs can move beyond a primarily administrative function to become active enablers of interregional collaboration, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness, sustainability, and transformative potential of I3 initiatives across the EU.

4. Steps to make your publication accessible

This chapter presents **actionable recommendations aimed at strengthening the engagement of MAs in I3 projects**, as well as **reinforcing the capacities** and motivation of structural funds' managing authorities to support interregional collaboration. The recommendations are informed by the deliberations of the discussion group and illustrative experiences from European regions.

Challenges in MA engagement are not uniform across Europe. While some regions face institutional ambiguity or unclear mandates, others have clearly defined MAs but encounter constraints such as limited resources for interregional work, short-term political priorities, and the need to secure sustained financing for cooperation. Recognising these differences is essential to ensure that guidance is context-sensitive and actionable across diverse regional settings.

The recommendations cover a broad spectrum of elements, including clarifying mandates and responsibilities, promoting early involvement in project co-creation, and grounding interregional collaboration in evidence-based planning. Each recommendation is accompanied by a set of practical initiatives, identifying responsibilities for either regional authorities or I3 project coordinators, to facilitate implementation and maximise impact.Recommendation 1: Clarify the mandate and responsabilities of managing authorities throughout the project lifecycle

Recommendation 1: Clarify the madate and responsabilities of managing authorities throughout the project lifecycle

Effective engagement of MAs in I3 projects relies on a well-defined and widely understood framework of their roles and responsibilities throughout the entire project lifecycle. This includes not only strategic functions, such as shaping project priorities, aligning initiatives with regional Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) and their targeted value chains, and providing political and institutional support, but also operational functions, including guiding implementation, supporting key regional stakeholders, monitoring progress, and participating in evaluation and learning processes.

Clear role definitions ensure that MAs can actively contribute at each stage—starting from project co-creation and endorsement, connecting with key regional innovation stakeholders (those connected to SMEs) through ongoing oversight and coordination during implementation, and culminating in assessment and dissemination of outcomes.

Without such clarity, MAs risk being underutilised or inconsistently involved, which can lead to delays in project execution, misalignment with regional development objectives, reduced strategic impact, and missed opportunities for

learning and replication. In addition, unclear mandates can create confusion among project applicants and stakeholders, hindering engagement, slowing decision-making, and limiting the long-term sustainability of interregional collaboration.

Box 2. Clear mandates for MAs - Jönköping region (Sweden)

Sweden provides an example of unambiguous MA responsibilities. Regional councils, such as in Jönköping region County, are legally mandated to coordinate regional development, including Smart Specialisation and I3 projects. This clarity allows for seamless engagement of MAs across all stages of the project lifecycle, from co-creation to evaluation, ensuring consistent oversight, alignment with regional strategies, and efficient use of resources.

The joint S3 platform "Partnership for Innovation" across Småland and the Islands demonstrates how regions with established MAs can operationalise early involvement, quadruple helix engagement, and strategic alignment effectively.

Box 3. Institutional provisions for interregional cooperation at planning stage – Kainuu (Finland)

In Finland, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment acts as the managing authority in the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme. According to the common provisions regulation the MA[3] can appoint one or more intermediate bodies (IBs) to carry out tasks that, in principle are under the MA's responsibility.

Finland's IBs include 14 regional councils, four Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY Centres), and the Finnish Food Authority. IBs are also referred to as funding authorities or funding providers. In practice, all activities visible to project parties are carried out by intermediate bodies. For example, IBs are responsible for publishing calls for project applications, selecting projects, making support decisions, and making payment decisions. They also communicate funding information, monitor projects, and conduct audits.

The Regional Council of Kainuu, is one of the 14 IBs, coordinating ERDF and the S3 for the NUTS3 area of Kainuu. Kainuu has explicitly included interregional cooperation into its S3 2021-2027.

Moreover, all Eastern & Northern Finland (NUTS2) regions, have and are investing in NUTs2-based over-regional collaborations. This has allowed investing in several initiatives and adopting an anticipatory approach in regard to initiatives and partnerships.

[3] The specific tasks of the Finnish MA are available (in Finnish) are define here: https://www.edilex.fi/lainsaadanto/20210797#L1P1

Box 4: Institutional diversity - Andalusia (Spain)

The experience of Andalusia illustrates the challenges and opportunities that arise from institutional diversity in managing S3, I3 and related European funds.

In Andalusia, responsibilities are distributed across several authorities:

- The Regional Ministry of Universities, Research and Innovation, through its General Secretariat for Research and Innovation, acts as the regional competent authority for smart specialisation strategies. According to the Decree establishing the Ministry's structure and competences, it is specifically responsible for "the promotion, coordination, and development of the Smart Specialisation Strategy for the Sustainability of Andalusia (S4 Andalusia) 2021–2027."
- The Regional Ministry of Economy, Finance and European Funds, through its Directorate-General of EU Funds, serves as the MA for ERDF.
- Andalucía TRADE, the Regional Agency for Economic Transformation and Development, functions as the Technical Office for S4 Andalusia. Although formally attached to the same regional ministry as the ERDF MA, it works closely with the competent S3 authority, playing a central role in the governance of the strategy.

This institutional distribution of competences reflects a rich and complex governance architecture. However, it also generates coordination challenges. For instance, applicants seeking project endorsement faced uncertainty over the appropriate point of contact—whether to approach the authority responsible for S3 strategy or the ministry managing EU funds.

Moreover. engagement with MAs was often concentrated on the endorsement phase reducing opportunities for strategic guidance and long-term learning. This case also underscores the importance for the European Commission to consider the diversity of institutional architectures across regions, ensuring that these differences are properly reflected when designing calls, assigning roles, and coordinating interactions between institutions, applicants, and beneficiaries.

Possible **initiatives** to support this recommendation include **to be implemented by regional authorities** are:

- Provide a clear definition of who MA are responsible for.
- Secure political mandates for interregional collaboration, mapping of current regional cooperation priorities, ensuring alignment with regional S3 and long-term development objectives.
- Establish regular dialogue mechanisms between MAs and regional decision-makers to maintain continuity and strategic oversight beyond political cycles.
- Publish comprehensive regional directories of MA contact points and institutionalise two-way communication protocols, including dashboards providing real-time updates on project progress.
- Involve MAs in project launches and evaluation panels to enhance their visibility, reinforce their strategic role, and strengthen partnerships

throughout the project lifecycle thus capturing policy insights at an early stage.

Main takeaway: clear mandates and well-defined responsibilities empower MAs to act as strategic partners throughout the project lifecycle, ensuring alignment, continuity, and maximum impact of interregional cooperation.

Recommendation 2: Ensure early MA involvement, informed-based planning, and alignment with S3 priorities

To maximise the impact of I3 projects, MAs should be actively engaged from the earliest stages of project co-creation. Early involvement allows projects to be strategically aligned with regional development objectives, leverage existing resources and stakeholders effectively, and be grounded in robust evidence. This involves comprehensive mapping of value chains and their key actors, identification of regional strengths and gaps, key innovation bottlenecks and ensuring that project activities are closely aligned with S3 priorities. By embedding MAs early in the process, projects benefit from enhanced strategic guidance, improved stakeholder buy-in, and a higher likelihood of long-term impact and sustainability.

Possible **initiatives** to support this recommendation include **to be implemented by I3 project´s coordinators** are:

- Engage MAs from the outset of project design and proposal development to ensure strategic alignment and foster co-ownership.
- Invite MAs to kick-off meetings as standard practice, ensuring they are directly involved from the earliest stages of collaboration.
- Involve MAs systematically in key I3-related meetings and decision-making forums to strengthen their role as facilitators of outward-looking strategies.

Possible **initiatives** to support this recommendation include **to be implemented by regional authorities** are:

- Build a robust evidence base through value chain mapping, S3 analysis, and identification of regional innovation capacities and needs.
- Align project investments with S3 priorities to maximise regional impact and facilitate interregional collaboration.
- Promote multi-fund synergies by combining ERDF and other EU funding sources with national and regional resources to strengthen project credibility and sustainability.
- Include/implement interregional innovation funding mechanisms based on European good practices

Box 5. Multi-fund synergies as a credibility driver – Azores (Portugal)

The Azores illustrate the benefits of early MA involvement and strategic alignment. By deliberately coupling S3 strategies with ERDF resources, the Regional Directorate for Science, Innovation and Development fostered strong regional buy-in, enhanced credibility, and positioned the region as a "Regional Innovation Valley."

This proactive approach enabled participation in projects such as i3-4-Blue Growth, demonstrating how early MA engagement and evidence-based planning can catalyse multi-fund synergies and reinforce the strategic impact of interregional projects.

Box 6. Grounding interregional partnerships in robust evidence and strategic alignment – Kainuu (Finland) and Eastern Macedonia & Trace (Greece)

The cases of Kainuu and Eastern Macedonia & Thrace, underscore the importance of grounding interregional partnerships in robust evidence and strategic alignment.

- In Kainuu, mapping of S3 priority sectors highlighted opportunities to scale innovation through I3 funding, particularly in emerging industries, ensuring targeted investments that build on regional strengths. For example, optimising value chains in circular bioeconomy, functional ingredients of natural resources as well as valorisation of the LUMI super-computer (HPC) and the data economy. Kainuu has adopted an outward looking approach in RIS3, as a tool to optimise value chains and localise strengths and potential.
- In Eastern Macedonia & Thrace, I3 projects were used to link cohesion policy objectives with innovation strategies, leveraging partnerships with more advanced regions to accelerate convergence and innovation-driven growth. Both examples demonstrate that evidence-based planning, combined with early MA involvement, strengthens alignment with regional priorities, improves project relevance, and enables more effective interregional collaboration.

Main takeaway: engaging MAs from the earliest stages, grounded in robust evidence and aligned with S3 priorities, ensures strategic guidance, stronger stakeholder buy-in, and maximises the long-term impact and sustainability of interregional project.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen mutual awarness between MAs, S3 Units, and I3 project partners

Raising awareness about the I3 Instrument among ERDF MAs and regional S3 units is essential, as many remain unfamiliar with its objectives and potential. At the same time, I3 project coordinators and partners often have limited knowledge of S3 and Entrepreneurial Discovery Processes (EDPs), which risks weakening alignment between projects and regional development priorities. Addressing these knowledge gaps on both sides is key to ensuring that I3 delivers transformative outcomes and effectively supports EU cohesion and innovation goals.

To maximise the impact of I3 projects, building mutual awareness should go hand in hand with early and sustained engagement. When MAs understand I3's added value, and project partners are well-versed in S3 strategies, collaboration becomes more strategic, resource-efficient, and outward-looking and will ensure better alignment and sharing of innovation key performance indicators (KPIs). This dual awareness fosters stronger ownership, prevents fragmentation, and ensures that interregional cooperation reinforces rather than duplicates regional innovation agendas.

Possible **initiatives** to support this recommendation include **to be implemented by regional authorities** are:

- Develop targeted awareness-raising campaigns and training for ERDF MAs and S3 units on the objectives, opportunities, and added value of I3.
- Increase understading of S3 strategies and EDPs among I3 projects coordinators and partners through dedicated workshops and guidance materials
- Establish regular policy dialogues and peer-learning for a for ERDF MAs to exchange best practices in engaging with I3 projects
- Create cross-learning platforms where MAs, S3 units, and I3 coordinators can jointly explore complementarities, synergies, and opportunities for alignment
- Encourage participation of MAs and S3 units in I3 projects events and networks to strengthen trust and foster co-ownership
- Promote the integration of I3-related lessons into regional and national policy cycles to reinforce long-term institutional learning.
- Leverage existing European regional networks - such as ERRIN, URBACR, and the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform – to capitalise on lessons learning and share best practices
- In collaboration with the Commission for Territoral Cohesion Policy and EU Budget (COTER) of the Committee of the Regions, pilot sessions where regional authorities per se, discuss experiences from interregional cooperation including the I3 programme. The aim is to have MAs exchange realistically and openly the positive and the challenging side of interregional cooperation, and built on these experience further

Main takeaway: Building mutual awareness between MAs, S3 units, and I3 project partners fosters strategic, outward-looking collaboration, strengthens ownership, and ensures interregional projects are aligned, coherent, and capable of delivering transformative EU-wide innovation outcomes.

Recommendation 4: Build targeted capacities and skills among MAs for interregional collaboration

Capacity gaps remain a major barrier to effective MA engagement in I3 projects—particularly in less-developed regions, but also in more advanced ones where resources exist yet EU competences are unevenly distributed. Many MAs still lack experience in coordinating interregional innovation initiatives, mobilising multiple funding streams, and supporting evidence-based policymaking.

Building targeted technical, strategic, and managerial capacities is therefore essential to enable MAs to act as proactive enablers of I3 implementation. In parallel, strengthening "soft" skills—such as stakeholder engagement, negotiation, and strategic facilitation—can enhance their ability to coordinate partnerships and sustain interregional collaboration.

By systematically investing in capacity building and institutional continuity, regional authorities can empower MAs to evolve from administrative gatekeepers into strategic enablers of interregional innovation. Enhanced capacities will improve alignment with S3 priorities, foster funding synergies, support evidence-based decision-making, and embed long-term sustainability into I3 investments.

Possible **initiatives** to support this recommendation include **to be implemented by regional authorities with the support of the I3 Support Facility** of the European Commission are:

- Specific training programs for MAs on interregional collaboration, project management, value chain analysis, and multi-fund alignment.
- Capacity-building exchanges and mutual learning exercises where MAs from more experienced regions mentor counterparts in less-developed regions.
- Organise pilot peer-learning sessions where regional authorities share first-hand experiences from interregional cooperation, including participation in the I3 programme. These sessions should provide a safe space for MAs to exchange openly on both the benefits and the challenges of interregional collaboration, identify transferable lessons, and co-develop approaches to enhance the effectiveness and inclusiveness of future initiatives. These can be organised In collaboration with the Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget (COTER) of the Committee of the Regions or the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform.
- Develop toolkits and guidelines for monitoring, evaluation, and evidence-based decision-making in I3 projects.
- Support in digital tools and dashboards to improve project oversight, communication, and reporting across regions.

Box 7. I3 Support Facility Virtual Events (2025) – Continuous Engagement & Knowledge Sharing

Throughout 2025, the I3 Support Facility organised a series of virtual events to engage stakeholders, build capacities, and facilitate continuous knowledge exchange. All event descriptions, recordings, and presentation slides are made available on the project website to ensure broader dissemination and ongoing access.

Topics covered so far are:

- I3 project financial reporting & communication
- Quadruple Helix: What are the main actors and how they operate
- From Thematic Platforms to I3 Projects
- Financial support to SMEs in I3 Instrument: practical applications
- Fostering joint innovation investments across EU regions: Public funding for interregional innovation
- Building Interregional Corridors
- How to build a successful I3 proposal?
- Role of clusters and networks in interregional innovation investments
- Access to finance and investors
- Interregional innovation project management: case study and best practice
- Leveraging the I3 Instrument to support industrial transition and boost local economies

Box 8. Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform – Building MA Capacities

The Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform (PLP) aims to strengthen the capacity of MAs to participate in interregional cooperation projects, fostering awareness, skills development, and an outward-looking perspective. The platform provides structured support to enhance MA engagement in policy learning and interregional collaboration, aligning with broader innovation objectives, including I3-aligned value chain initiatives.

Key PLP learning and capacity-building services include:

- Peer Reviews, offering MA's access to policy makers and expertise from other regions and often providing the foundations of future interregional cooperation.
- A range of capacity building and skills development actions with a focus on less developed regions and Europe's Eastern border.
- Knowledge sharing through targeted publications such as and policy briefs: supporting knowledge development and practical guidance to strengthen MA competencies
- Information and awareness-raising activities: info days, National Contact Points (NCPs), and national-level events to increase understanding of cooperation opportunities.
- Networking and Matchmaking Events: Events such as "Europe Let's Cooperate" facilitate partner identification, experience sharing, and interregional collaboration.

Main takeaway: strengthening both technical and soft skills of MAs transforms them from administrative actors into strategic enablers, ensuring effective interregional collaboration, evidence-based decision-making, and sustainable impact across I3 projects.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen institutional memory and knowledge retention within MAs

High turnover, shifting political cycles, and fragmented engagement often result in loss of institutional knowledge, reducing the long-term impact of interregional projects. Ensuring that knowledge, lessons learned, and best practices are systematically captured and shared is key to building sustainable MA capacities.

Possible **initiatives** to support this recommendation include:

- Establish internal knowledge repositories for I3 projects within MAs, documenting procedures, decisions, and outcomes.
- Create handover protocols for incoming staff to ensure continuity of MA engagement and strategic oversight.
- Develop cross-regional peer-learning networks to exchange experiences, lessons learned, and case studies.
- Encourage participation in EU-level policy labs and training programs to maintain exposure to interregional practices and innovations.

Main takeaway: preserving institutional knowledge and creating systematic learning mechanisms ensures continuity, strengthens MA capacities, and safeguards the long-term impact and strategic relevance of interregional projects.

Recommendation 6: Explore the adoption of a "Seal of Excellence" model to leverage quality-labelled projects and enhance funding synergies

To maximise the value of high-quality but unfunded I3 project proposals, the European Commission could explore the introduction of a *Seal of Excellence*[4] as a quality label. Given the multi-partner nature of I3 projects, which involve coordination across regions and diverse stakeholders, applying a Seal of Excellence presents both an opportunity and a challenge.

Similar to the approach used under Horizon Europe, such a mechanism would allow well-evaluated but non-funded proposals to receive formal recognition of quality, enabling their support through alternative funding channels—such as regional ERDF allocations, national innovation programmes, or public procurement schemes.

By establishing a framework for recognising excellence, MAs can promote continuity, reduce duplication of evaluation processes, and ensure that strong

[4] https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/seal-excellence_en

interregional initiatives do not lose momentum due to budgetary constraints. Linking the Seal of Excellence to innovative public procurement or pre-commercial procurement schemes could further stimulate demand for interregional innovation outcomes and facilitate the scaling of successful pilot initiatives.

Despite the potential benefits of the Seal of Excellence in recognising high-quality proposals, its application to multi-partner, interregional projects such as those under I3 presents specific challenges. The Seal has traditionally been used for single applicants, such as SMEs or individual research teams, and allows well-evaluated but unfunded projects to access alternative funding channels at national or regional level. While it provides formal recognition of quality and can facilitate continuity, the multi-partner nature of I3 consortia adds complexity to its uptake. Questions arise about how to maintain the original partnership structure, allocate funding across regions, and align diverse regional priorities with interregional objectives.

Experience from previous initiatives shows that the success of the Seal depends on dedicated uptake mechanisms. Regions that have embedded Seal-certified projects into their ERDF or national innovation programmes have achieved higher uptake and clearer processes. In contrast, regions without supporting schemes or awareness campaigns tend to underutilise the Seal, limiting its impact. For multi-partner projects, establishing governance rules that preserve the evaluated consortium structure—or provide guidance on adjustments—is critical to maintain integrity and accountability.

Furthermore, capacity building among regional authorities and project partners is essential. Stakeholders need to understand how the Seal works, how funding can be channelled, and how to align interregional initiatives with local strategies. By integrating the Seal of Excellence into broader funding synergies—combining interregional innovation investments, structural funds, and national programmes—high-quality but unfunded I3 projects can continue to deliver impact, ensuring that momentum is not lost due to budgetary constraints.

Possible **initiatives** to support this recommendation include:

- Develop a mechanism for awarding a *Seal of Excellence* to highly rated but unfunded I3 proposals.
- Enable ERDF and national programmes to finance projects carrying the *Seal of Excellence* through simplified procedures.
- Encourage the use of public procurement as a vehicle for supporting Seal-labelled innovations, in particular for solutions aligned with regional S3 priorities.
- Promote coordination among MAs, innovation agencies, and public buyers to streamline processes and align evaluation criteria.

- Share experiences and best practices on Seal of Excellence implementation across regions through the I3 Support Facility.

Box 9. The Seal of Excellence – a mechanism to enhance synergies and optimise funding opportunities

The Seal of Excellence is a quality label introduced under Horizon 2020, awarded to project proposals that meet all evaluation thresholds but cannot be funded due to budget limitations. It recognises the excellence of such proposals and encourages other funding bodies—particularly those managing ERDF and national programmes—to support them, making use of the Commission's rigorous evaluation process.

Each certificate includes essential information on the proposal, call, and applicants and is digitally secured to ensure authenticity. Under Horizon Europe (2021–2027), the Seal of Excellence has been further strengthened to promote synergies between Horizon Europe and Cohesion Policy. This mechanism helps channel high-quality innovation projects into regional investment frameworks, ensuring that strong ideas continue to deliver impact across Europe.

Main takeaway: Adopting a Seal of Excellence for high-quality, unfunded I3 projects can preserve momentum, unlock alternative funding, and strengthen interregional collaboration, ensuring promising initiatives continue to deliver impact across Europe.

Recommendation 7: Integrate forward-looking perspectives into interregional strategies to sustain long-term collaboration

Ensuring the long-term sustainability and strategic relevance of I3 projects requires that interregional cooperation be embedded in forward-looking regional and European strategies. Managing Authorities and regional governments should work together to align interregional initiatives with broader policy frameworks—such as industrial transition pathways, green and digital agendas, and the future EU Cohesion Policy architecture—while promoting continuous strategic foresight and adaptability.

By adopting forward-looking approaches, regions can anticipate emerging opportunities, identify new thematic areas for collaboration, and build resilient interregional partnerships that extend beyond project cycles. Integrating foresight into S3 updates and interregional roadmaps can strengthen policy coherence, enhance regional resilience, and create a shared vision for the future of European innovation ecosystems.

Possible **initiatives** to support this recommendation include:

- Embed forward-looking and foresight exercises into regional S3 and interregional cooperation strategies.

- Encourage MAs and S3 units to jointly identify long-term priorities and emerging sectors for future interregional collaboration.
- Develop interregional roadmaps that align short-term I3 actions with longer-term regional and EU policy goals.
- Support scenario-based planning and cross-regional dialogues on the future of innovation investment, industrial transition, and resilience.
- Facilitate regular exchanges between MAs, regional foresight experts, and European institutions to ensure policy coherence and early identification of strategic opportunities.

Box 10. Regional foresight to guide interregional collaboration – Brittany (France)

The region of Brittany has embedded strategic foresight into its S3 revision process to anticipate future technological and societal shifts. Through regular foresight exercises involving academia, clusters, and Managing Authorities, Brittany identifies emerging domains such as ocean energy, sustainable aquaculture, and digital sovereignty as priorities for interregional cooperation.

This forward-looking approach enables the region to align I3 initiatives with evolving EU priorities, strengthen its participation in European industrial value chains, and ensure long-term policy coherence.

Box 11. Interregional road mapping for industrial transition – Upper Silesia (Poland)

The region of Upper Silesia has integrated forward-looking planning into its industrial transition strategy to ensure the long-term sustainability of interregional cooperation. Building on its strong industrial base, the region developed an interregional roadmap focused on clean technologies, circular industry models, and advanced manufacturing.

The roadmap, prepared in coordination with the Managing Authority and regional innovation stakeholders, aligns short-term I3 project outcomes with long-term regional and European transition priorities. This approach strengthens policy coherence, facilitates the mobilisation of future investments, and ensures that interregional partnerships continue to evolve beyond individual project cycles.

Main takeaway: Embedding forward-looking perspectives in interregional strategies ensures that I3 projects remain relevant, resilient, and aligned with evolving regional and EU priorities, securing long-term collaboration and impact.

Summary of barriers and recommendations

Barrier	Recommended Response	Example
Institutional diversity & limited incentives for MAs´ active involvement: Unclear mandates and responsibilities of MAs leading to inconsistent involvement, delays, and misalignment	**Recommendation 1**: **Clarify the mandate and responsibilities of MAs throughout the project lifecycle** — including strategic and operational roles; publish directories; secure political mandates; establish regular dialogue; involve MAs in launches and evaluation panels	**Sweden – Jönköping region**: Clear legal mandates for MAs allow coordinated S3 and I3 implementation. **Finland – Kainuu**: Institutional provisions with intermediate bodies streamline responsibilities. **Andalusia – Spain**: Illustrates challenges of institutional diversity and need for clarity
Late involvement in the project cycle & communication breakdown: Delayed or insufficient MA involvement in early project stages, weakening alignment with S3 and reducing impact	**Recommendation 2**: **Ensure early MA involvement, informed-based planning, and alignment with S3 priorities** — engage MAs from project design; invite to kick-off meetings; map value chains; align investment with S3; promote multi-fund synergies	**Azores- Portugal**: Early MA involvement coupled S3 with ERDF, improving credibility and enabling strong I3 engagement. **Kainuu - Finland & Eastern Macedonia & Thrace - Greece**: Grounded partnerships in robust evidence and strategic alignment
Awareness and knowledge gaps : Low awareness of I3 instrument among MAs and limited knowledge of S3/EDP among project partners, causing weak alignment	**Recommendation 3**: **Strengthen mutual awareness between MAs, S3 units, and I3 project partners** — awareness campaigns, training, policy dialogues, cross-learning platforms, participation in I3 events, and integration of lessons into policy cycles	**I3 Support Facility Virtual Events** (2025): Comprehensive series of awareness-raising and capacity-building sessions. ERRIN, URBACT, Interreg Europe PLP: Existing networks leveraged for peer learning
Capacity shortages : Capacity gaps among MAs in managing interregional initiatives, coordinating stakeholders, or supporting evidence-based policymaking	**Recommendation 4**: **Build targeted capacities and skills among MAs for interregional collaboration** — training, mentoring, peer-learning, toolkits, digital tools, pilot sessions with COTER/Interreg Europe PLP	**Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform**: Peer reviews, capacity building, knowledge sharing. **I3 Support Facility** events: Continuous training and knowledge tools for MAs
Knowledge retention: Loss of institutional memory due to turnover and fragmented knowledge management, reducing continuity and long-term impact	**Recommendation 5**: **Strengthen institutional memory and knowledge retention within MAs** — internal repositories, handover protocols, peer-learning networks, participation in EU-level policy labs	Internal MA repositories for I3 procedures; cross-regional peer-learning networks; mutual learning exercises ; I3 Support Facility policy lab
Perceptions of bureaucracy and risk aversion : High-quality but unfunded I3 project proposals losing momentum, and absence of mechanisms for alternative funding	**Recommendation 6**: **Explore adoption of a "Seal of Excellence" model to leverage quality-labelled projects and enhance funding synergies** — award quality labels; allow ERDF/national programmes to fund Seal-labelled proposals; coordinate MA–innovation agency–public buyer processes	**Seal of Excellence** (like Horizon Europe): Existing mechanism showing how quality labels unlock alternative funding; can be adapted to interregional multi-partner settings
Political cycles and shifting priorities & Inward-looking orientation: Lack of forward-looking strategic alignment, limiting sustainability of interregional cooperation	**Recommendation 7**: **Integrate forward-looking perspectives into interregional strategies to sustain long-term collaboration** — embed foresight in S3; identify long-term priorities; develop interregional roadmaps; conduct scenario-based planning	**Brittany (France)**: Foresight embedded in S3 to anticipate future domains for cooperation. Upper **Silesia (Poland)**: Interregional roadmap linking I3 outcomes to long-term industrial transition

5. Closing remarks

The findings from this discussion group and the proposed recommendations were presented during the I3 Support Facility #13 Virtual Event, "*How to engage managing authorities in I3 projects?*", on Thursday, 27th of November. The event will offer an opportunity to reflect on these insights, explore potential avenues for strengthening MA engagement, and gather feedback on how future support actions—such as capacity-building, early involvement practices, improved knowledge-sharing, and enhanced funding synergies—could be shaped moving forward.

Moreover, the insights from this analysis will inform the potential future activities of the I3 Support Facility (I3SF), highlighting opportunities to better support Managing Authorities. This may include exploring targeted capacity-building approaches, fostering peer-learning exchanges, and promoting guidance on evidence-informed decision-making to strengthen strategic engagement throughout the I3 project lifecycle. The findings also point to the value of knowledge-sharing platforms, cross-regional networking, and mechanisms for early involvement to enhance alignment with S3 priorities and interregional collaboration. By reflecting on these possibilities, I3SF can help identify ways to strengthen multi-fund synergies, preserve institutional memory, and support the long-term impact and sustainability of I3 initiatives across EU region

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